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ABSTRACT

This document contains eight articles from German newspapers that feature women who have achieved career success in very diverse economic sectors, while simultaneously highlighting the discrimination and other problems (including lower income, fewer promotions to executive positions, and smaller pensions) that many other German women continue to encounter in the workplace. The following articles are included: "Introduction" (Simone Denise Battenfeld); "A Woman Helps Small to Medium-Sized Businesses" (Margarete Pauli); "A Woman as Cathedral Building Supervisor in Cologne; Barbara Schock-Werner from Nuremburg Convinced the Churchmen with Her Unusual Qualifications" (Birgit Matuscheck-Labitzke); "Seafaring--Women Still Have a Tough Time" (Die Welt); "A Marharaja Encouraged Her" (Fritz Riedl); "Women Push Their Way into Independence; Women Company Founders on Course to Success--Fewer Bankruptcies" (Rocco Thiede); "Few Women Have the Say in the Cyberworld; Women Have Only a Meagre Seven Percent Share of Top Positions in the Multimedia Branch--The Message: Get Involved Online" (Ina Honicke); and "On Small Waves to the Top; Duisburg Mathematician Gerlind Plonka Develops Process To Compress Big Image Files" (Charlotte Kerner). Concluding the document are 65 addresses of organizations that work on issues related to equality of women and men. (MN)

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German women today

What some German newspapers say

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Summary

In world terms, women currently do two-thirds of its work, earn one-tenth of its income and own 1 per cent of its property.

Despite political efforts towards equality of men and women, the women's share of positions on the executive floors of commerce and industry is still extremely small at about 8 per cent. Women in the German Federal government in 1998 accounted for only 35 per cent of Cabinet members, while in Sweden and Norway they made up 50 per cent and 47.4 per cent respectively. The situation is even worse in the German Federal Parliament. With women MPs accounting for 30.1 per cent of the total, compared for example with 42.7 per cent in the Swedish national assembly, Germany ranks fifth in Europe.

But a sampling of the German Press finds a number of examples of how German women are standing up for themselves and being successful in various professions.

Note:

The Inter Nationes Basic-Info 3-2000 'The New Man' also covers the topic of equality of men and women.

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Inter Nationes / IN Press
Editor: Sigrid Born
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Production: Ilona Orthen
January 2000

Introduction

In world terms, women currently do two-thirds of its work, earn one-tenth of its income and own 1 per cent of its property.

Despite political efforts towards equality of men and women, the women's share of positions on the executive floors of commerce and industry is still extremely small at about 8 per cent. Women in the German Federal government in 1998 accounted for only 35 per cent of Cabinet members, while in Sweden and Norway they made up 50 per cent and 47.4 per cent respectively. The situation is even worse in the German Federal Parliament. With women MPs accounting for 30.1 per cent of the total, compared for example with 42.7 per cent in the Swedish national assembly, Germany ranks fifth in Europe.

Germany's so-called 'Women quota' – and particularly its effectiveness – is contentious. The measurable success of the quota regulations also appears to be small. True, in the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, the proportion of women among senior permanent civil servants and civil service employees rose from 24.4 per cent in 1988 to 29 per cent in 1994. But if anyone does not wish to promote women there is nothing in the Act to prevent this, says industrial law expert Klaus Bertelsmann. He points out that the criterion of qualification is so elastic that at best it has turned into a justification for giving preference to men. Despite the quota, the Act's so-called 'hardship' clause gives men plenty of opportunities. Thus, single- parent fathers receive promotion just as much as men who as the only breadwinner in a family have to support a wife and children. However, Eva Rühmkorff, who headed Hamburg's Equal Rights office for almost 10 years and later became Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs of the State of Schleswig-Holstein, accepts her role as a 'quota woman'. "Without the quota I would never have been a Cabinet minister," she says. But the quota regulation alone appears insufficient to achieve equality of men and women.

Quota regulation

In 1980, a Parliamentary commission of inquiry on 'Women and Society' recommended quota regulations covering women in the German civil service. In 1986 an expert opinion found these to be constitutional, and in 1997 the European Court of Justice declared them to be in conformity with European Union regulations.

The German Act rules that provided women in the civil service have the same qualifications as their male competitors, they shall be given preference and promotion until women account for 50 per cent of the employees in their respective department.

According to a study titled 'The situation, behaviour patterns and prospects of women managers in commerce and industry', presented in November 1998, women executives' main

problem is the tough task of reconciling job and family. No less than 71 per cent of the women managers polled said they had had to cope with women-specific difficulties during their careers. Women still are hardly able to reconcile having both children and a career; only 27 per cent of the women managers have children.

There were never before so many highly qualified German women. More than half of all students in Germany are female, although the proportion of senior women professors is all of 5 per cent. Changed educational conditions have also permanently altered the living conditions of young women compared with those of previous generations. For example, Caroline Schneider celebrated her 30th birthday with mixed feelings. She graduated well, succeeded in getting a good first job, and she plans soon to marry her partner. She would also like to have children – but what will happen then to her job, which she enjoys, and for which she swotted for years at university? She can't imagine devoting herself exclusively to a family for several years. And taking maternity leave [for three years] has for some women turned out to be an employment risk. A legal claim to former jobs applies mostly to fulltime posts, and more than half of the new mothers want to work only part-time.

The life of Claudia's mother, a divorcee who as a housewife can expect only a small pension, and has only now been able to find a job after great difficulties, has made clear to Claudia that marriage can no longer be equated with lifelong security for the wife. In addition, more than one-third of German marriages now end in divorce. At present, more than 20 per cent of young German women say they would rather do without children.

The so-called 'three-stage model', the sequence of a woman initially going to work, followed by looking after a family and then returning to work, is waning as a problem-solving model. The 'family time' now takes up only a quarter of a woman's life compared with about half 100 years ago. However, the modern model of working and looking after a family at the same time also calls for support in childcare.

Even allowing for the fact that a woman can take care of her own social security, greater employment and equality of women is important. Poverty in old age is still female.

Despite mass unemployment, the German Federal government must not lose sight of promoting women. That begins in school, where in mathematics and natural science lessons girls often feel disadvantaged compared with boys. This trend continues at university: two-

thirds of German women students graduate in linguistics and the arts, while only 15 per cent want to be engineers. Commerce and industry, however, seek above all economists, engineers and computer scientists. Besides state projects to promote women, which for example support women company founders or aim to enable more women to access the Internet, self-initiative and self-help is called for. One example is the European Women's Management Development Network (EWMD), founded in Brussels in 1983. Its aim is to offer women executives a forum and opportunities to compare notes. The network's members, who currently represent 45 companies, include Renate Vorwerk, sales manager of Deutsche Telekom, in Bonn. "Why shouldn't women also benefit from networks, like the 'old boys' network that men operate so successfully?" she says.

The former Harvard women professors Anne Jardim and Margaret Hennig recognized back in the 1970s how difficult it is for women to penetrate the male bastion of the business world. In 1974 they realised the world's first, and so far the only, MBA programme for women.

The concept of supporting women and showing them what they can achieve by means of examples is also pursued by a project titled 'Preparing women to lead!' The project, launched in 1997 and aimed at promoting women academics, is financed by the European Commission and the German Federal Ministry for Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, and coordinated by the Technical University of Berlin. Women graduates in all disciplines can apply in Berlin for a three-month traineeship alongside women managers in commerce and industry, public administration and politics.

Even if the legal situation of women in Germany has improved markedly in the last 30 years, equality of men and women has not yet been achieved. The following examples show women who despite all adversities have made their way in greatly differing sectors, such as a cathedral building supervisor, a mathematician, and an entrepreneur.

Simone Denise Battenfeld
(IN Press)

A woman helps small to medium-sized businesses

By Margarete Pauli / *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

The first Baden-Württemberg Women Entrepreneurs Forum in Stuttgart was a great success. More than 450 women turned up, and the public response was enormous. In retrospect, Birgit Buschmann's professional advancement began with this forum. To be more precise, it began with a video and the television interviews she gave as one of the two women who organised the event. "I was shown on our regional TV programme, and apparently that made an impression," she says, recalling the look of astonishment on her boss's face. But the TV exposure got people talking about her, and a short while later she was appointed personal assistant to the President of the State Trade Office (LGA). The 38 year-old has since advanced further in her career. On April 1, 1999 she assumed responsibility for coordinating the research of the Baden-Württemberg State Parliament's newly established commission of inquiry into promotion of small to medium-sized businesses.

The Parliament can appoint such a body "in preparation of decisions based on extensive and significant facts". Particularly in this classic region of small to medium-sized businesses, in which three-quarters of all employees work in such enterprises, the new commission has a special importance. The body, chaired by Christian Democratic Union (CDU) MP Gisela Meister-Scheufelen, is charged with analysing the situation of small to medium-sized businesses, especially family enterprises, recommending improvements in general conditions and promotional measures and, not least, thinking about new promotion models.

General manager Buschmann's main role here is to manage and coordinate the conceptual and content side of the commission's work. Her task is to process motions by the Parliamentary parties, request comments from the relevant Cabinet ministers, bring expert witnesses into the proceedings, prepare commission hearings, and edit the results in a final report. The report is to be tabled by this summer, before the election campaign for a new State Parliament gets into its 'hot phase'.

Buschmann sees in her personal background a good, and also thoroughly successful, example of people's new 'patchwork' biographies, with their frequent changes from one working sector to another. She's convinced that such mobility will more and more replace the classic, straight-line career path. She initially studied history and physics for the teaching profession

in order later – besides caring for her children – to take a PhD in business policy. She came to administration work five years ago via projects in commerce and industry and a course at an advanced technical college.

Her subjects are now 'New forms of cooperation of government and business' and 'Models of business promotion beyond customary subsidising'. During her work at the LGA, an authority tasked especially with promoting small to medium-sized businesses, she developed above all projects to promote women in commerce and industry. She initiated Company Founder Days and forums for women entrepreneurs, co-founded networks, and designed advisory and qualification offers for businesswomen. Her latest project is a fund for women entrepreneurs, which assists company founders and young entrepreneurs with capital, contacts and coaching. In the meantime, every third new company in the State is founded by a woman, and every fourth managed by one.

Buschmann describes herself as a "Woman of action who arrives at solutions speedily, asserts herself, gets things done, and does not allow herself to be put off by any rules." But, she says, these qualities have not only been to her advantage. "When men behave like that, they're regarded as being oriented on goals and results. By contrast, such behaviour by women is interpreted as being ambitious and careerist – but one must simply get on with it."

She says that over the years her "strong conceptual line" was joined by a "strong aim to do something in politics". Now she's stimulated by being able to work in the commission of inquiry and examine on a very fundamental level the issues of promotion of small to medium-sized businesses. In particular, she enjoys the opportunity to take part in "developing the future". Will she perhaps also go into politics at some time? "That could certainly be a further goal," she says. But for the time being she wants to support the commission with her expertise – without belonging to a political party, and in the role of "honest broker".

A woman as cathedral building supervisor in Cologne

Barbara Schock-Werner from Nuremberg convinced the churchmen with her unusual qualifications

By Birgit Matuscheck-Labitzke / *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

"She's a woman who makes men feel slightly uncomfortable: tall, slim, stand-offish at first impression, reserved and immensely clever." That was how a journalist described Barbara Schock-Werner. The 16 men of the Chapter of the High Cathedral in Cologne are obviously an exception. They are said to have decided in the first ballot for the dark-eyed professor from Nuremberg. "The question of a candidate being a woman was not an issue for we churchmen," said highly amused archive head Rolf Lauer. "What was decisive was academic and practical qualifications." In view of the candidate's professional competence, even the Cathedral Building Commission – composed of arch-conservative Cardinal Joachim Meisner, Cathedral Dean Bernard Henrichs, and Isle Brusis, Minister for Cultural Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia – did not take long to make up their minds. So for the first time in its 750-year history, a woman was appointed to supervise construction and restoration work on Germany's mightiest cathedral.

A total of 28 men and four women, all of them well qualified, had applied for the dream position. Several of them, however, failed to meet the basic requirements of being "Catholic and having a good head for heights". The 51 year-old professor at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg beat the rest with her outstanding credentials. The expert on the history of art and qualified construction engineer not only has a deep knowledge of the history of cathedral building due to Gothic building organisation and architecture being her academic focal points. Having completed a traineeship as bricklayer and carpenter, she also knows how to use a trowel and mortar. The later university lecturer also gained some years' experience in an architect's office that specialised in preservation of historical buildings and monuments. Also, as Vice President of the German Castles Association she co-organised preservation work on centuries-old large buildings. And, quite by chance, she also studied in Stuttgart under two luminaries of the art of stained glass windows. In Cologne, she's now managing the biggest stained glass restoration workshop in Germany. The some 100 craftspeople – stonemasons,

scaffolders, carpenters, smiths, painters, electricians, master steelworkers, and two site managers – whom she's supervised since January 1999 would have a hard job in trying to pull the wool over her eyes.

When Schock-Werner was born in Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart, in July 1947 it appeared that rising to such great heights was not for her. For the daughter of a working-class couple, completing secondary school was a good enough educational goal. "For my family, achieving university entrance qualification was out of the question," she recalls. She credits the fact that she did so to her nature, which, she says, has given her "somewhat more energy" than most other people.

Then married, she wrote her doctoral thesis on 'Strasbourg Cathedral in the 15th Century' between the births of her son and daughter, now aged 20 and 17 respectively. "If I had focused all my energy on my children, it might not have been all that good for them," she says. So they grew up relatively independently and can now take their own decisions. "My son at present is thinking about all the things he doesn't want to study, and my daughter has decided to spend her last two school years not in Cologne but at an international college in England," she says, happy with both of them. Her newly retired husband moved to Cologne with her. He was a deputy museum director there when they met, and she moved to Nuremberg with him. Now he's followed her back to the Rhine. "That's a matter of course for us," she says.

One foot on the Rhine

The cathedral building supervisor has already got one foot on the Rhine. The Cathedral Chapter provided her with a "beautiful small flat" in the shadow of the famous church. "It's a pleasantly smooth transition accompanied by a lot of goodwill and friendliness," she says, while in the background two computers clatter and print out her latest book. "My husband had to proof-read almost one thousand pages – a real chore." The book deals with the buildings created by Prince Bishop of Würzburg Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn. "That sounds very erudite, which it is, but it's bound to be a best-seller," adds Schock-Werner with a laugh.

Julius Echter became Prince Bishop in 1573, aged 28, and ruled for 44 years. "He was a visionary who with great passion and incredible energy built 330 churches, administration buildings and schools." The author compiled material on him over 10 years and documented

his buildings with photographs. She says her research on the man and his work taught her that genius alone was not enough. "It also takes hard work if one wants to achieve something." She also had the great fortune to be supported in every respect by her predecessor in Cologne, cathedral building supervisor Arnold Wolff.

Dream come true

But Schock-Werner has also experienced less happy times. Some of the discrimination she suffered at universities and advanced technical colleges got through to her, and there were stages in her life when she came near to giving up.

Her position in Cologne is a dream come true. She's responsible for ongoing scrutiny of the cathedral, for the documentation of all structural changes, and for the inventory of more than 40,000 fittings. To help her settle into her new work she had long talks with her predecessor. One of her first major tasks was to make the preparations for a conference of European cathedral building supervisors, which take place in Cologne every autumn.

When, 20 years ago, she researched the 'alimentation' of the Cologne cathedral building supervisors in the Middle Ages she discovered that as well as being paid wages they received four litres of wine per day, and once a year were given a new silk hood. A desirable position she thought, way back then.

Seafaring – women still have a tough time

Flensburg.- They have neither a broad back nor an anchor tattoo or hair on their chests. Despite that, they can take a lot of hard knocks. "Women who go to sea have to be tough to get by," says historian Christine Keitsch, 37, of North German seaport city Flensburg. She has thoroughly documented the lives of 98 German seafaring women, and found that on the world's seas emancipation is not in the race. Only 0.24 percent of German Merchant Navy officers are women. In Denmark, twice as many women are on the bridge.

It is only in the last few years that it has become easier for German women to obtain a mate's or master's certificate. Germany's first Merchant Navy woman captain, Annaliese Teetz, of Hamburg (1910-1992) had to go to court to obtain hers. In the 1930s she dressed as a man so that she could work on ships, and later won a court order allowing her to attend a nautical college. She obtained her master's certificate in 1956, but no shipowner entrusted her with his vessel. So she was never able to fulfil her dream. The most popular training courses today are for qualification as navigation officers, engine room mechanics and technicians. epd.

Die Welt

Mail-order business for dental laboratories located between cherry trees and vines

A maharaja encouraged her

Eva Maria Roer sends her employees fruit-picking during working hours so that everyone has home-made jam in winter

By Fritz Riedl / *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Measured by current clichés, Eva Maria Roer is a successful businesswoman. Her company, DT Bad Kissingen, achieves annual sales of DM 50 million, she drives a very fast car, and has her own table at the Klaushof Restaurant. The fine coffee cups and saucers at her company are from Japan. Besides books such as 'Picasso', 'Bavaria's Queens' and the 'National Geographic Atlas of the World', her bookshelves also contain titles such as 'The Future of Sales'. She likes gold and diamonds, and sometimes also takes a jet to Vancouver for a day when business demands it.

According to conventional wisdom, Roer is a rather unusual entrepreneur. Who locates a company headquarters among gooseberry and blackcurrant bushes, cherry trees and vines? Who orders their employees to go fruit-picking during working hours so that there will be home-made jam for all in the winter? But Roer hates clichés. She hates them because she's had to defend herself from them all her life – as a woman among men, as a woman up against men, only so that she could be and do what she enjoyed.

She was born in Tepplitz, in the Sudetenland, in May 1944. Following the Czech expulsion of the Germans from the region in June 1945, the family landed up in Dresden, in the then Soviet Occupation Zone. Her father soon held a senior position and was responsible for food supply. But the family fled to West Berlin so that the Communist Party could not take him over.

Roer, now 54, still remembers their flight to Bremen on a Berlin Airlift aircraft. Later, she learnt to ride a bicycle in Schonungen, in Lower Franconia. In 1963, she took her A-levels in Hesse with the intention of studying economics and Russian in Frankfurt and later in Hamburg. "The Cold War was on then. Everyone else learned English. I did exactly the opposite." In 1965, a United Nations scholarship took the ambitious student to India for six

months. After a 6,000 km/3,600-mile round trip and an impressive meeting with a maharaja, who gave her a new sense of the concept of religion, she took a "first courageous step" and left the Catholic Church.

In 1966, then aged 22, Roer won another scholarship, this time to study in Vancouver. "That was due to my own efforts, not my father's good contacts," she says. And as the co-founder of a well-known German supermarket chain, he certainty had plenty of those. In Vancouver, as the only woman among 15 students, whom four tough professors constantly sounded out, she really had to fight for her master's degree.

After her return to Germany she failed for the first time in her life in an attempt to tackle only 'hard nut' tasks. She gave up on a mathematical subject that she was supposed to make her doctoral thesis. As a consolation, during the PhD scholarship course she met her husband-to-be. And at the University of Maryland's branch in Crete, where in the rank of major she lectured to US armed services men and women on mathematics and statistics, she dropped out of academia altogether. As she puts it, she "closed the chapter of an academic career characterised by bourgeois influences". The bundle of energy sought other hard nuts to crack, and in 1978 founded a mail-order service for dental laboratory articles. She used her Fiat to deliver to the Post Office the articles her initial customers ordered from her first catalogue, produced on a typewriter.

Now, sitting at her table at the Klaushof Restaurant, Roer says male pressure in the business world was and remains discriminatory. Which is why she had to answer the question of whether "women can handle a screwdriver" for herself alone.

Until then she had employed only women in her company. She says she did not want to indulge in phoney feminism, "but fight for something positive – that women as business objects and subjects have equal rights with men". Her deputy is now a man, a Cuban. "He's a bit macho, but what better could happen to a macho than be able to work together with so many attractive women." Roer, the well-read woman with a sense for art, the veteran fighter, dreams of a society in which people can live their dreams and not merely dream about what life could be. Amid her success and wealth, she aims to hold fast to the perception that the goal of management is not maximising profit, but adding value to things.

Women push their way into independence

Women company founders on course to success – fewer bankruptcies

By Rocco Thiede / *Die Welt*

Berlin.- German women are better at founding companies than are German men. This is the conclusion of a survey by the German Equalisation Bank.

The bank's statistics show that of the 48,251 men and women company founders in the new eastern German Länder (states) who five years ago were promoted with proprietary capital assistance, 3 per cent of the men had failed by the end of May 1996. But only 1.9 per cent of the women had done so. In the 'old' western federal states, too, bankruptcies among women company founders at 4.9 per cent were slightly below the average of 5 per cent of 9,995 founders.

The national success rate of the promoted new women entrepreneurs is more than 95 per cent. "That proves," says Dagmar Wöhrl, a member of the Bundestag (lower house of Federal Parliament) Economics Committee, "that given optimal general conditions there is nothing to stop an expansion of women in business."

Already today, every third company founding in Germany is made by a woman – and the trend is upward. In addition, more than 800,000 of Germany's total of three million companies are now headed by women. In both eastern and western Germany, the branches most favoured by women are hairdressing and the retail trade in textiles and shoes. In eastern Berlin alone, 86 per cent of the new textile shops opened since German reunification in 1990 are firmly in women's hands.

However, the income and growth conditions for companies founded by women are not as favourable as those of men. For example, according to the Federal Statistics Office half of all self-employed women have only a monthly net income of less than DM 2,000. Their sales volume is much lower than that of firms owned by men. Women's companies also have lesser growth in terms of employees. Five years after their founding in the new states, the women's

firms employed an average of 4.1 persons. By contrast, the figure for the men's companies was 8.1 employees.

Does that mean the companies founded by women are less dynamic? "It's a different dynamism than that of men's firms," notes Lisa Heermann, General Manager of the Association of German Women Entrepreneurs (VdU), in Cologne. She points to the business branches women traditionally favour and the different demands they make on their companies. "Women founders still have a special weakness for cosmetic studios, hairdressing salons or boutiques," complains Federal MP Wöhrl. In traditional women's branches such as the retail trade, the hotel and catering industry, and some freelance professions, predatory competition is greater. "That is why women should seek niche markets and have the courage to push into more promising branches such as crafts and trades or industry, which are still men's domains." Women in the new eastern German states would have better chances in these sectors, adds Wöhrl, because they had a different training and have a broader occupational background. "That is where one is more likely to find a woman freelance who heads an engineering consultancy for mechanical engineering or housing construction," she says.

Women founders' corporate objectives also differ from those of their male competition. Women prefer smaller businesses that are easy to manage. Furthermore, the VdU has noted, women work more team-oriented than do men, and for many businesswomen it is more about professional self-realisation and implementing ideas than about maximising profit and expansion. In general, the VdU adds, women are regarded as cautious businesspeople who take fewer financial risks and therefore are seldom faced with cash-flow problems.

However, complaints are made time and again about disadvantaging of women in the granting of bank loans and government promotion funds. "In general, we give women and men equal treatment," says Jochen Struck, department head in the credit section of the German Equalisation Bank. He points out the "naturally better position of women applicants for loans who, for example, want to set up high-tech businesses". Wöhrl also does not believe women are discriminated against. "Women disadvantage themselves when they go in exclusively for less promising branches," she says. "In the next ten years, about 700,000 small to medium-sized businesses will be looking for a successor to run them. Why not a woman boss?"

Few women have the say in the cyberworld

Women have only a meagre seven per cent share of top positions in the multimedia branch – the message: get involved online

By Ina Hönicke / *Die Welt*

Munich.- Gitte Knöpfle has carved out a career for herself in the multimedia world. In only a short time, she advanced from studio manager to being head of a staff and organisation division. At the Hamburg agency Kabel New Media she's responsible for its entire operations division. That she seldom works less than 60 hours a week doesn't bother her. "When you have a managerial position in the multimedia world that's perfectly normal."

Women such as Knöpfle are still the exception in the online sector in Germany. In particular, women account for less than 10 per cent of senior management positions. The branch news service 'Multimedia', of the High Text publishing company, in Munich, has proven that hardly any other branch in Germany has so few women in top management. It surveyed 1,500 multimedia companies and found that only 7 per cent of them was headed by women. And that despite the fact that women make up 40 per cent of multimedia branch employees. That compares with the Federal Statistics Office's reckoning that women account for 25 per cent of the total workforce in German commerce and industry.

The survey's findings contradict once and for all the cyber branch's image of itself. Online businesses, after all, like to portray themselves as modern, open and women-friendly. The High Text publishing company sees the reason for the lack of women on the companies' executive floors in the history of the multimedia sector. Most of the present companies were started up mainly by employees of the computer programming workshops of the 1980s and the early 1990s, when deep knowledge of programming and hardware was still irreplaceable. "And tinkering with computers is not female," says the publishing company. That resulted in men occupying the top positions in the new multimedia firms right from the start. Women work mainly in the creative and organisational sector. Those who are now managing directors ware mostly founding members of their businesses.

"It's high time that changed," says Sissi Cross, Managing Director of Comet Computer, in Munich. She knows what she's talking about, because her company promotes women to

senior positions. The 45 year-old graduate in computer science has in the meantime been awarded many prizes for her efforts to achieve equality of women and men at work. Her own career reads like one big success story. Having spent a short while as a research assistant at the Technical University of Munich, she worked as a developer, technical editor and project manager at Siemens. She founded her own company 12 years ago.

Closs's aim right from the start was to offer women optimal working conditions. In her company, every type of part-time work is possible. Only 10 of the employees work fulltime; all the others put in reduced hours in individually designed working models. "If I think someone is suited to the work, I provide the corresponding working conditions," Closs says. The mother of a seven year-old boy, she set up a company childcare group four years ago. She also recently hired a qualified woman to take care of employees' children who are now of school age [German schools have no regular afternoon lessons], including during school holidays. At Comet, at any rate, part-time work in no way means giving up demanding tasks.

The situation is somewhat different at a cutting-edge multimedia company like Kabel New Media, in Hamburg. Hardly any of the women employees there have children, and scarcely any of them can imagine reconciling their jobs with looking after children. "The way I work these days, that's completely out of the question," says Knöpfle. Perhaps that's also why the agency's employees obviously feel like a big family.

So do some companies serve as substitutes for families? That appears to be so for many women in the multimedia branch. But the snag here is that flexible forms of working such as part-time work are almost non-existent, and women employees find it difficult to reconcile family and job. The Comet model has so far found no imitators.

Stephanie Czerny can tell a thing or two about women multimedia professionals being flops as well as tops. Two years ago she published for Burda Online the first German women's magazine on the Internet. It was titled Cybil, and was aimed at "making women capable of using the Net," says the then Editor-in-Chief. She was convinced the magazine would be a success. Afer all, the Internet was a medium cut out for women. Earlier, the secretaries had gossiped in the hallway during their coffee break. In future, they would chat online. But Cybil was 'killed' after only a few months. The online magazine was unable to grab the interest of its target group.

Media women agree that many other women still find the online world difficult. The most recent Internet usage surveys confirm that. Cyber champions constantly talk up the proportion of women users, but in reality it's all of 20 per cent. In the near future, however, their numbers can be expected to grow. Young women, in particular, are showing greater interest in the so far mainly male domain. Only in learning how to use the Net do women prefer to be among their own kind. Computer courses for women are currently profiting from that.

A further step towards independence is the linking of women's networks. These are certainly not some kind of gossipy tea or coffee party. The networks are about the no-nonsense transfer of know-how, further training and financial advice. These are extremely important for women who want to be self-employed. As Birgit Krug reports: "Women company founders have fundamentally more problems in obtaining bank loans." She's an entrepreneur and member of the Federal Association of Women in Freelance Professions and Management (BFBM). She says one of the reasons for banks' reluctance to lend start-up capital to women is that many women pitch their need for financing too low. That appears to make them uninteresting for the banks. On the other hand, Krug adds, this caution pays off because: "Women fail less frequently when they found a business."

The women who have made it in the colourful multimedia branch call on other women not to give up. For despite all its prejudices and obstacles, the online world offers qualified and creative women good career opportunities. The 'cyber women' say that in no way must the data superhighways be left solely to men. They say that would result very quickly in women being among the world's information 'have-nots'. Rather, the message is: get involved online instead of drawing back from it.

Information on the Internet:
Federal Association of Women in Freelance Professions and Management (BFBM): http://www.bfbm.de
German Women Company Founders Forum: http://www.zfw.de/dgfhome
Women Give Technology Fresh Impetuses: http://lovelace.fh-bielefeld.de
International Business Site for Women Company Founders: http://www.women.de

On small waves to the top

Duisburg mathematician Gerlind Plonka develops process to compress big image files

By Charlotte Kerner / *Die Zeit*

When the young woman with the short haircut pressed the lift button for the third floor, a girl student asked her: "Are you studying maths, too?" For the third floor of the LE Building on the campus of Duisburg's Gerhard Mercator University, in Germany's industrial Ruhr area, houses its mathematics department. But the woman who was asked the question has long not been a student. In the spring of 1998, Gerlind Plonka, of Rostock, in eastern Germany, joined the university as a professor of mathematics.

The 32 year-old laughed with a little embarrassment when she told the story of the encounter in the lift. Plonka not only looks younger than her age, she was also always very bright for it. She took her PhD at 26, and three years later obtained her postdoctoral qualification. She no longer seems shy when she makes clear: "I would be very annoyed if someone thought I got the university post only because I'm a woman. Unfortunately, that is the reverse side of the promotion of women."

It was not her gender that won her the senior position in Duisburg. She believes "the icing on the cake" for her was the 1997 Heinz Leibnitz Prize she won as the best young academic talent of that year and which stood her out from the crowd of competitors. She received the DM 30,000 prize for "my total work to date". And that focuses on wavelets, a sector which is even younger than the researcher. Wavelets are functions which mathematicians have been exploring in an intensive way only since the mid-1980s. With the aid of these small waves, large quantities of data can be evaluated faster or compressed for electronic transfer. Computer images need only one-fiftieth of the usual memory space.

The winds of political change in Germany were blowing strongly when Plonka took her exams in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). She still remembers the moment in the summer of 1990 when for the first time she held western D-mark notes in her hand. East Germans who visited the West in those early euphoric days were given 'Welcome money', which meant she could finally buy the propelling pens and pencils she had long yearned for.

But she also remembers the fears she held then about her future. For in newly reunited Germany a GDR research scholarship, upon which she had pinned her hopes, suddenly appeared uncertain. But Plonka was after all able to continue research work at the University of Rostock, secured by a promotion scholarship. In 1996, she completed "my most important work", her postdoctoral thesis on 'Refinable function vectors and multi-wavelets'.

Today's star is a product of GDR promotion of outstanding students

Plonka picks up pencil and paper, draws a square, divides one corner into ever smaller boxes, fills them with grey dots, and then explains what multi-wavelets do. For example, to portray images mathematically it is not the surfaces that count, but the points where there is a change from light to dark. Plonka taps with her pencil on a suitable dividing line. That enables one to tell a lot about an image. So what is sought are formulas which describe exactly such sudden changes of conditions, with as little data as possible.

The classic methods use a sum of sinusoidal waves of varying intensity and frequency. But whereas sinusoidal waves oscillate incessantly, a wavelet oscillates briefly to zero and then disappears altogether. Such functions – with compressed, extended and displaced wavelets – enable local conditions to be analysed much more precisely. Plonka's achievement is that she discovered the multi-wavelets. "These functions deliver matrix filters which have many of the advantages of earlier wavelet filters, but are also symmetrical," she says. Her work in this research field has won her international recognition.

The star of today is actually a product of the GDR's promotion of outstanding students. She first attracted the attention of a teacher at her polytechnic secondary school in Hohenmocker. He encouraged her to take part in a district maths 'Olympics', although she had not prepared for it. The then 11 year-old came back with a silver medal, and subsequently won a bronze in another local competition. Now the state-promoted Young Mathematicians Club of Neubrandenburg paid attention to the talented girl.

In the next few years she attended several school holiday camps at which the mornings were spent juggling with figures and the afternoons were devoted to swimming and rambling. From fifth grade onwards, a mentor, a maths student in Rostock, took her under his wing and set her tasks by correspondence. She received the corrected test every two weeks, plus new exercises. The student also offered her personal counselling and organised visits to the university for

her. "As early as when I was still in the seventh grade at school it was clear for me that I wanted to study mathematics in Rostock," she said.

The natural scientist never had to feel that she was an outsider in a man's world or that she had to assert herself. There were plenty of girls in GDR maths clubs, and more than half of the 16-member group with which she began to study in 1985 were women. Three of them later obtained doctorates. Female self-doubts never arose. Plonka also was never faced with the question: "Child or career?" She had a daughter and married when she was only 20 ("That wasn't unusual in the GDR!"), and the young family moved into a company flat. After a one-year 'baby pause', during which her scholarship continued, her growing daughter was cared for until noon by at first a crèche and then a kindergarten, and finally an after-school care centre. "The rest is a question of time division," she says. "It's difficult only when one is stuck with a mathematical problem." Plonka's move from Rostock to Duisburg has made her almost a single parent on weekdays. Her husband followed her to Duisburg, but his workplace is more than 100 km/60 miles away. That their now 12 year-old daughter can cook something for herself in the microwave when she comes home from school and has no problems being on her own makes day-to-day organisation easier.

Plonka is one of a generation that although it grew up and was educated in the GDR was able to start work in reunited Germany and now handles computers or uses the Internet with the greatest of ease. Naturally, she long ago set up her own Website, and that she cooperates and publishes with an American academic via e-mail has become absolutely a matter of course for her. Even if she has never met her colleague personally.

Equal rights policy in Europe
Medium-term action programme of the Society for Equal Rights for Women and Men

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You will find further information and links in Inter Nationes Basic-Info 3-2000 'The New Man'.